

REPORT FROM SIGBI CONFERENCE,

OCTOBER 2020

INTRODUCTION

This was SIGBI Conference, but not as we know it!

SIGBI President Organisers were clearly operating under extremely difficult circumstances, with changes having to be incorporated right up to the last minute, though the bones of the Conference, the speakers had been fixed well in advance. It has to be said, also that the speakers stepped efficiently up to the mark, they were best friends with Zoom and obviously had plenty of practice in making presentations throughout lockdown.

There are in-depth blogs from the Conference, available on the Conference Web Page Sigbi.org/2020-sigbi-belfast-virtual-conference, so my plan is to direct you in that direction, and just to share some of my feelings about the conference and the speakers in this piece.

DAY 1

Conference welcome was by President Isobel in her relaxed and inclusive way and we also were welcomed by International President Sharon Fisher who encouraged us to participate and to walk with her on the Road to Equality. She stressed the value we have as Soroptimists in relation to our voice in the UN and how we must use it for the best in striving for better lives for women and girls.

The first speaker was Baroness Hall- a very important member of the British judiciary and pioneer for women in the law. She is a formidable public speaker who makes her very serious points in accessible language. I was particularly struck by her thoughtful point that we need 'women in the law to educate the men', One can argue that we need women in all walks of life 'to educate the men'! She made the telling point, also, that there is leakage from the law by women who leave their jobs in order to manage their domestic situation and this of course is another situation not just for lawyers but for most professionals.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to have questions and answers for this session.

The next session was business – reports from Federation and we then had the opportunity to celebrate the work that Soroptimists do on the ground in their communities. This is of course the reason why we are Soroptimists, and it is important that we don't lose sight of it in the melee of pandemic.

Again, all the reports are available on the SIGBI site.

The second Keynote Speaker was Sue Black, an academic from Durham University, which sounds extremely privileged, but in fact was hard won. A single mother and mature student she has struggled through her life to provide for her family and to make her, woman's, voice heard amid the cacophony of male noise in the scientific community. For me, as a woman I found it so inspiring that she felt all the time that when 'something had to be done' she could find a way to do 'it' or facilitate 'it' being done. She organised a campaign to save Bletchley Park, she has organised courses to involve mothers in technology #techmums, and emphasises to women the links between their study and interesting jobs in technology.

DAY 2

Started with a greater celebration of membership, noting how hard we have been working throughout the pandemic and with extreme difficulty to keep in touch with one another and with the communities we support. Again, all of these reports are available on the various Club and SIGBI sites.

Dr Alison Gardner was the keynote speaker on Saturday morning, to the topic of Modern Day Slavery. An academic in the Rights Lab. , University of Nottingham, she has huge knowledge about the depth and width of human slavery in our modern world, the majority of victims of whom are women and children. She mirrored to us the ways in which we support slavery, through buying cheap clothing, allowing foreign forced labour, and closing our eyes to obvious cases of abuse within our communities. She tells us that we have a particular duty to raise awareness wherever we can. What particularly struck me was her phrase 'nobody gets up in the morning saying "who am I going to enslave today"'. The key problem is getting to understand the *real* cost of goods, working with suppliers and businesses and being prepared to ask in supermarkets 'how do you know your suppliers are free from exploitation'. Programme Action 2021?

The brilliant work done by Soroptimists throughout the year was recognised in the Best Practice awards, all covered in detail on the website.

The final keynote speaker on Saturday was Jane Garvey who is a presenter on BBC Radio Women's Hour. Before she leaves the programme at the end of the year, she shared with us her background, her early years as a Regional reporter and stories from the years during which she has been the presenter of this prestigious programme. She discussed some of the very important and sometimes sensitive areas which were brought to the forefront, the difficulties of ageing, the distant vista of equal pay, the importance of 'taboo busting'. From her personal history she told stories of how people make huge contribution to communities. Since this is *exactly* what Soroptimists do, it is a pity she did not know more about us!

Personally, I was delighted to hear her sometimes irreverent stories, and deep knowledge of the British scene, but I am aware that although she is an excellent, engaging and amusing speaker, she might not necessarily have resonance with the broader SIGBI audience.

And then the Conference closed. Welcome to the new SIGBI team and the leadership of Johannah Raffan.

I learned a lot from the speakers and as ever recognised the huge amount of work generated in the community of Soroptimists. But, I missed the collegiality, the opportunity to catch up with friends from Ireland and from other parts of SIGBI and even the shopping!

Better luck next time.

Mary Hession, November, 2020

